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IDEALISM AND REALISM.¹

IN one of his dialogues Plato, when he is about to enter upon a searching criticism of the *esse-percipi* theory of Protagoras, prefaces his discussion with these words: "A wise man is not likely to talk nonsense. Let us try to understand him." Plato may possibly have been over-benevolent in this remark about the wise man; and certainly I am very far from wishing to imply that the terms 'idealist' and 'wise man' are interchangeable. But I do think it not unreasonable to expect that the adversary of the idealist, when he pays him the compliment of discussing his doctrine, should take it for granted that his opponent also is clothed and in his right mind. I am led to make this remark by the fact that in current discussions views are being continually fastened upon the idealist which it is scarcely exaggerating to characterize as sheer insanities. I am going to consider a few of these misrepresentations at the outset, in the hope that I may thereby do something to clear the atmosphere, and help to focus attention on the real matter in dispute.

1. We are told that the idealist seeks to make out his case against realism, or to establish his own idealism, by an appeal to the physiological argument. That argument is briefly as follows: We know physical objects only in so far as they affect our senses. The resulting perceptions are merely 'in us,' — sensations, impressions, states of consciousness. Moreover, they are what they are because our particular sense instrument has certain characteristics, a certain structure, and is in a certain condition. They therefore do not give us the real qualities of real objects in space; they are merely states of our individual consciousness. And yet we have no other way of getting at things, so 'things' must mean to us just these inner states. Now this physiological argument clearly proves a great deal too much. It is plain as day that it hasn't a leg to stand on. It cannot even be stated

¹A paper read in the discussion of "Idealism and Realism," at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association held in Baltimore, December, 1908.

unless we assume to begin with that we do in some way know things as distinct from our impressions. The idealist who would rest his case on this argument is consequently in a strange quandary. His doctrine is proved by the physiological argument; but, if that doctrine be true, the physiological argument is meaningless. In other words, his doctrine is the conclusion drawn from premises which that very conclusion makes absurd. Undoubtedly the facts of sense physiology present their own peculiar problems when one attempts to integrate those facts with other facts of experience in the construction of one's philosophy, and any philosophy to be successful must solve those problems. But we can all, idealists and realists alike, join in the laugh at the expense of any one who would think to get his philosophy so cheaply as in the pretended argument given above.

So much for the madness of the method which the idealist is supposed to employ. And now for the madness of the results which he is supposed to hold.

2. The idealist it is said resolves physical phenomena into mental phenomena. He holds that those trees which you see are not real trees out there in space, but bundles of feelings, groups of sensations, states of consciousness, — that and nothing more. In consistency with his view he ought to say, for example, that when you walked around here this morning it was not a real objective physical sidewalk that you walked on; though you may not have observed the fact, the truth of the matter rather is that you were treading on your feelings all the way. The idealist in short is represented as if he performed some wonderful feat of legerdemain with the facts of experience, dragging the outer world within, and there consuming its outwardness utterly. It is as if a serpent should get his tail in his mouth and begin to swallow his own body, and should continue the process until he had succeeded in swallowing it all, and nothing but a disembodied mouth remained. The idealist is represented as if, having reduced physical phenomena to mental phenomena, he ought to feel some uneasiness every time he walks out of his library and closes the door, lest the room and all its contents, as they pass out of his conscious experience, should drop out of existence altogether,

and as only able to free himself from this anxiety by smuggling back some eye, — apparently any eye will do, that of fly, archangel, or absolute, — to keep watch over his possessions in his absence.

3. Again, the idealist is represented as logically forced to believe that the actual processes of nature are identical with his experience and knowledge of those processes ; that thinking, his actual finite human thinking, makes the objects that it knows come into being.

4. And, finally, all these things are summed up in the charge that idealism entirely obliterates the distinction between subjective and objective. By objects, we are told, the 'plain man' means, — and by the way it is interesting to observe how often the plain man is made the court of appeal in current discussions, as if he were the unconscious oracle of profound wisdom, — things in space, things he can touch. These he opposes to, and sharply contrasts with, mental phenomena, to which the idealist in his folly would reduce everything.

Now all of these things are so obviously absurd that the idealist, if he really holds such views, should simply be regarded as unbalanced, — though no less so than his adversaries who undertake seriously to discuss these views with him. And yet, absurd as these things are, they may most of them be extracted from a certain interpretation of the *esse-percipi* theory. That was an unfortunate phrase, — *esse-percipi*. Had the word experience been in those days as much an idol of the forum as it has since become, Berkeley would no doubt have used it ; it would have served his purpose, saved him from some of his perplexities, and from many misunderstandings. No doubt, in the exuberance of youth, and intoxicated by his discovery of the way in which seeing and inferring have coalesced in experience, the way in which we read into one sensation its habitual sense companions, Berkeley may have said extravagant things which lead in the direction of the absurdities mentioned above ; and the older and maturer Berkeley is rarely allowed the opportunity to correct the impression. But the chief object of Berkeley's work was to demolish the matter fetich of his predecessors, the matter substance of

earlier hypothetical realism, which was vaguely thought of as a something wholly inaccessible to experience, its underlying ground, unknown and unknowable except in so far as one through faith or instinct might bring himself to believe that his experiences more or less accurately copied or represented those inaccessible realities. In short, if we were to speak in terms of the subjectivism which the idealist is supposed to be guilty of, we should have to say, for example, that when you drank your coffee this morning it was not a real object existing in space that you drank, you simply swallowed your sensations, or you had or were the sensation of swallowing other sensations. But, on the other hand, if we were to describe that same occurrence in terms of this realism, we should have to say that what you drank was not the coffee of experience ; you swallowed a mysterious something, you know not what, which produced those sensations in you. This statement is no less ridiculous than the other. Coffee that could only be characterized in this fashion would be, in Berkeley's phrase, a manifest repugnancy. If the idealist would not accept the former statement as required by his view, it is equally true that the modern realist would repudiate the latter statement.

It is surely a significant fact that the first searching criticism of the *esse-percipi* theory was made by the first great idealist, and that some of the criticisms he makes are the same as those which our contemporary realist makes, when he thinks he is attacking the idealist, but is in reality opposing the common enemy, subjectivism. And it is not less significant that the first great realist, Democritus, is the man who more than any one else is responsible for the *esse-percipi* theory of his fellow townsman, Protagoras.¹ And the inference which these facts at once

¹ "There are two forms of knowledge," writes Democritus, "one genuine, one obscure. To the obscure belong all of the following : sight, hearing, smell, taste, feeling. The other form is the genuine, and is quite distinct from this." And then distinguishing the genuine from the obscure he continues : "Whenever the obscure (way of knowing) has reached the *minimum sensibile* of hearing, smell, taste, and touch, and when the investigation must be carried farther into that which is still finer, then arises the genuine way of knowing, which has a finer organ of thought." (Bakewell, *Source Book in Ancient Philosophy*, p. 59.) And according to Sextus Empiricus it was Democritus who said : "By convention sweet is sweet,

suggest is, I think, amply justified in the history of philosophy, viz.: that a realism which makes the reals lie outside of experience in an inaccessible beyond has subjectivism for its twin error; and that idealism from its first appearance in the Western world has been a conscious repudiation of subjectivism. Whatever other failings are to be ascribed to it, subjectivism at least is not one of them.

Now the idealist certainly intends to keep the distinction between subjective and objective, and to view spatial experiences as the experiences of real objects in space, and not as feelings or sensations having their being in some mysterious way out of space altogether and in the mind. And he thinks he can make these phrases less abstract and more luminous than his adversary. He furthermore holds that nature's laws and ways and processes are what they are, and not what we in our ignorance may fancy them to be, that nature is not created anew with every revolutionary discovery in science, that we must obey nature to conquer her, must patiently interpret and not impatiently anticipate her. Yes, he even undertakes to show that if, and in so far as, the material world is viewed as unreal the mental order becomes itself unreal. One can only fix one's meanings, and distinguish thinking from dreaming, by tying up to the physical order. The old Hindu thinker, who had persuaded himself of the unreality of the world of physical phenomena drew the only proper inference when he proceeded to deny the reality of the mental as well, and to teach the "four-fold nothingness" in the words: "I am nowhere anything for anybody, nor is anybody anywhere anything for me."

And, on the other hand, the modern realist has abandoned this earlier form of hypothetical realism which cut the reals off from experience. He believes that we have a direct knowledge, a direct experience of the real objects, which, however, he still supposes to have in some way or other, independent existence. And when he proceeds to tell us what these real objects are he

by convention bitter is bitter, by convention hot is hot, by convention cold is cold, by convention color is color. But in reality there are atoms and the void. That is, the objects of sense are supposed to be real and it is customary to regard them as such, but in truth they are not. Only the atoms and the void are real." *Ib.*, p. 60.

uses language that is, as far as it goes, hardly distinguishable from that of the idealists. One of them, who carries along with his realism an 'epistemological idealism,' writes: "The reality we know and the reality we predicate with any intelligibility or significance is reality for us as predicators. Even when we think of this kind of reality as being possible in another universe unmediated by a single gleam of intelligence or sense-experience, we still *are thinking* of it; we cannot think ourselves and everything else out of such a universe without being in this universe to do the thinking away. No thinker, no thought object."¹ Another tells us that we know the reals directly in experience, and in no other way, and that we distinguish real objects from sensations and feelings of our own solely by the setting which we are forced to give the particular experience.² And still another defines his realism in this way. "We may lay it down that the real must be known through our purposive attitudes or conceptual construction. Real objects are never constituted by mere sense perception. They are not compounds of sensation. They presuppose creative purpose. They can only become objects for a self-realizing will. The real is the *intelligible or noumenal*, not the mere immediate."³ (*Italics mine.*) I do not mean to imply that these statements agree with each other, or that the rest of our 'new' realists would accept any one of them; but they are typical of the sort of thing one runs across continually in current expositions of realism, and agree in showing how unlike this new realism is to what we have been accustomed to call by that name, and how suspiciously like idealism it is after all. Why should thinkers who can use such language wish to repudiate idealism, and revive the old word realism with this new and highly idealistic coloring? It would seem as if idealists, believing as firmly as any one can in the reality of the natural order, and realists, teaching that the real is the experienceable and the intelligible, ought easily to be able to get together. They must after all be twin brothers under the skin. The answer is various. One apparently holds aloof from

¹ Professor McGilvary, in the *PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW*, XVI, p. 274.

² Professor Fullerton, in his *Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 186, Chs. IV, V, and XIII and *passim*.

³ Boodin, in *Journal of Philosophy*, IV, p. 538.

idealism because he wants to have some "residual reality uncatalogued after the inventory of all experience is taken."¹ Another because he has identified idealism with immediatism. A third because he proposes to stand fast by the rigid distinction between mental phenomena and physical phenomena and to put ideas in the group of mental phenomena ; and if this be done, it is obvious that physical phenomena cannot be brought into the group mental without losing the distinctive character that they had in the contrast with the mental.

In so far as realism is merely a protest against subjectivism we can all be realists. If it means to affirm the existence of independent reals outside the realm of experience, and therefore wholly independent of consciousness, it is the old hypothetical realism whose absurdities have so often been shown up in the history of philosophy. If it means to affirm the existence of independent reals which are none the less wholly accessible to experience, directly experienced or known, it is hard to see how this doctrine differs from idealism, except that the idealist would be constrained to point out that the word independent is not strictly taken in such usage.

No criticism of idealism has any value which starts out with the assumption that we have, to begin with, two separate orders, called mental phenomena and physical phenomena, or a 'world without' and a 'world within,' and then proceeds to put ideas into the class mental phenomena, the so-called world within, and then to rule idealism out because it has taken the half of reality for the whole. It has no value because it simply begs the question at issue ; for idealism is one continued protest against the finality of any such divisions of realities. If one *could* make any such division of experience into two mutually exclusive orders of existence, it is plain that ideas could not be confined to either group, for the simple reason that ideas live, move, and have their being in the facts of experience, and in the facts of both orders. Of course, we can and must distinguish physical phenomena from mental phenomena ; and the growth of the natural sciences and the science of psychology clearly attest both the possibility and

¹ Professor McGilvary, *Journal of Philosophy*, V, p. 594.

the utility of the distinction. These sciences, however, keep in their separate provinces not by dividing actual concrete objects of experience into separate groups, but by adopting and maintaining distinct points of view with regard to all possible objects of experience. The objects themselves may overlap, and furnish material for several sciences, and all objects may serve as material for the psychologist. The separate sciences seek to unify experience, so far as this is possible, from the standpoint of certain deliberately chosen aspects of experience. They deal, not with reality in all the fullness that it has in actual experience, but with abstractions, or, if this term is odious, with reality in so far as it may be conceived or unified by means of certain selected, and selective, principles and categories.

When this dualism has been called in question by those who view it as simply an instance of the survival of early crudities of thought, in which even primitive animism has had its share, it will not suffice to bring in the 'plain man' to settle the question, or even to invoke the imposing name of science, since it is an issue that falls outside the province of the scientist as such. Every one must test the question for himself by turning to his own experience and asking what it is that he there finds. When one thus turns to one's own experience, one simply does not find any such dualism. Subject and object turn out to be always correlative terms, mutually implied and organically related in all data of experience that have any significance whatsoever.

But, in the attempt to master and control experience, and to comprehend it, a new meaning of subject and object appears. Subject comes to stand for the transient, private, idiosyncratic; object for the permanent, the common, the universal. The physical experiences are then isolated and assumed to be objects in the strict sense of the word, because, at first sight, they seem to possess these characteristics, and to give us something to tie to; whereas sensations, feelings, volitions, and perhaps ideas, which, again at first sight, appear to lack these characteristics, are referred to the subject. But it takes very little reflection to see that this simple-minded distinction cannot be carried out. Objects, cut off from those subjective factors, lose all the significance which

they possess in concrete experience ; and the subject, regarded as independent of these objective factors, loses all definiteness. Moreover, when we take the object to be the immediate impression, the thing-as-immediately-apprehended, it turns out to be tantalizingly subjective. Objectivity proves to be not something handed over as a gift in the direct impression, but rather a characteristic which the impression *acquires* in being *thought*.

We hear a great deal nowadays about 'data,' the 'actual,' the 'factual,' about being 'objective,' 'taking things as they really are,' etc. These are popular but question-begging-phrases, — usually little more than benevolent characterizations of our own views. Of course we all, of whatever philosophical stripe, intend to found our edifice on the solid rock of fact. The idealist contention merely is that the solid rock of fact dissolves into the shifting sands of sense in so far as ideas are extruded.

But if it is impossible to regard this naïve classification as final, none-the-less the motive that led to its adoption is the motive that underlies the efforts alike of science and philosophy : the desire, namely, in and through individual experience to reach universal experience. The history of ontology is the record of the attempt to do this starting from the object side of the dual relation characteristic of all experience ; and one of the pathways to idealism follows this route. The effort is in the first instance to discover in experience a permanent ground or cause, something which will hold over from one moment of experience to another. Unless I can do this, the momentary experiences, being of all things most slippery and uncertain, could leave behind a mere chaos of impressions. Moreover, I always assume in this undertaking that, if I am able to read off the meaning of my shifting experiences in such a way as to give them their place in an orderly and dependable world, I am getting reality not only as it is for me but also for every other intelligent being. One at first tries to conceive this real as 'matter-substance' underlying experiences and causing them, only to be continually baffled by finding such matter slip off into a world by itself and lose all meaning, and so fail to help in the interpretation of the actual world of experience. Various shifts are tried. 'Law' may appear as the one perma-

ment thing. Things one and all change, but the law of their changing remains the same. But this is too abstract. Or, again, it is the 'Logos' that remains as the common possession of all ; the story that experience is unfolding has its coherency ; and, finally, the real comes to be viewed as 'idea.' As compared with the immediacy of sense-experience ideas are stable, stubborn, dependable, and shareable. The real is, meaning fulfilled, unfolded in experience ; and experience as fulfilling meaning.

Of course idea, as here used, is not an image, not an impression, not a state of consciousness. It is not even form as contrasted with content. Form and content here cannot be sundered. Just as a story cannot be a story independently of the characters and incidents in which the story is unfolded, and just as the incidents do not become a story by mere accretion, but only through the unity of plan that makes the parts relevant to each other, so it is here with the idea. It is literally a one in many and many in one. Universal experience is one and continuous with individual experience. It is simply individual experience fully understood, and that means, viewed as constituting a realm of experience in which there are no stray facts which have not found their setting in relation to all the rest.

A good deal of unnecessary trouble is sometimes stirred up by asking such questions as this : What, on such a theory, must we say of happenings in the remote geological past ? Did they actually occur, if the ideal is the real, and there was as yet no mind to report the fact ? There is no more difficulty about such occurrences than about occurrences that happened last year or yesterday, say, in the bowels of the earth. One believes such things to be real because he finds present evidence in the facts before him ; that is, he can only find the intelligible setting for the facts he observes by putting it into relation with certain other facts, and a relation which determines their position and date unalterably. Of course they happened, as the story of nature requires. But this is only a difficulty for idealism provided one has made the mistake of confusing ideas with mental phenomena, and of putting the mind in the body, or in some other fashion imprisoning it in a 'world within.' The mind goes wherever thought

carries it, may be busy exploring the heart of nature, or the distant ages of the past, and is not to be viewed as a thing bound to its definite date and place.

The criticism is sometimes made that one has no right to use the word 'idea' in the sense which I have given it. The 'plain man' doesn't do it. Well, I think as a matter of fact this is one of the commonest meanings of that word. When I speak of a person as 'a man of ideas,' what do I mean by the phrase? That he is a big bundle of impressions, that he is full of images? Do I not always mean that he has a genius for getting facts of experience put in their appropriate setting, and in this way bringing order out of chaos. Again, when one speaks of 'catching an idea' what does one mean? Getting an image, getting a mental state, getting the form apart from content? I think not. One means grasping the manifold in the unity of thought, catching the thread of meaning that guides one through a labyrinth of detail. But the thread is meaningless apart from the detail.

There is another pathway that leads to idealism. But I have not time to do more than mention it. It is the epistemological road, and it starts from the subject side in the subject-object relation of individual experience. It discovers through analysis the part played by the activity of thought in giving experience the character that it has for us, and discovers, by the method of dialectic, the structure which this activity must have if experience is to be intelligible at all; and finally it seeks to show the way in which the subject of individual experience finds its own true being in the subject of universal experience, which in turn finds *itself* in the object of universal experience. But whichever pathway one follows, the result is certainly not subjectivism.

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